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Taking Deathcare Digital During COVID-19 Without Sacrificing Customer Service

By Bill Williams Jr.

TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA – As the world practices social distancing and continues to limit in-person interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional way of doing business in deathcare is challenged.

In the current environment, many families, especially the elderly, are simply not comfortable visiting facilities to make arrangements for themselves or a loved one. For funeral homes, cemeteries and crematories, this leaves owners and operators with the challenge of how to serve their communities remotely in this unique landscape.

As soon as the word “technology” appears in this article, some deathcare professionals will move on to what’s next in their day. For those who have effec-



tively served families using the same proven manner for several decades, that is understandable. As a licensed funeral director who ran funeral homes early in my career and has served the deathcare profession my entire professional life, I understand that nothing is quite as meaningful as a genuine, face-to-face conversation and handshake.

The good news is there are ways to integrate technology to help sustain operations today and tomorrow without sacrificing your time-tested practices.

This is especially true for a deathcare firm’s approach to the recordkeeping and administration of its preneed and perpetual care trusts. Many firms can enhance their service to families and also solve challenges with efficiency, organization and compliance – issues that have multiplied for firms during COVID-19 – by leveraging technology that

supports trust and sales programs. It's a small shift in approach that can help sustain and grow your business both during and after the pandemic. Similar to many other trades, deathcare-specific technology exists to serve the unique needs of the profession. While the right technology for a deathcare firm will vary widely, these digital resources are often created and tailored to support the services, care and attention a firm provides to every family that walks through its doors.

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The deathcare industry is often slow to adopt new technologies. After all, the work we do is centered around providing comfort to people in ways technology cannot do by itself. However, in times of crisis, we must adapt to continue to support families suffering a great loss. This adaptation isn't a technological overhaul but a steady introduction to digital tools that better enable us to meet the needs of clients. Below is an overview of some of the capabilities you should consider seeking out when integrating technology into your firm.

DIGITAL PROCESSING OF PRENEED CONTRACTS

With families uncomfortable or unwilling to visit facilities during COVID-19, deathcare professionals would be wise to, first and foremost, provide a method for processing preneed contracts digitally.

Technology exists that allows deathcare firms to create, edit and send contracts electronically – with automatic, error-free calculation – allowing families to make arrangements from the safety and comfort of their homes. It can also save you and your staff the time it takes to manually input paper contracts, a task that can bring added difficulty with employees working remotely.

PRENEED CONTRACTS OFFERED THROUGH YOUR WEBSITE

To bring even greater convenience to your community, deathcare firms can utilize technology that allows the selling of preneed contracts directly on your website. Consumers can easily select a preneed package, execute a preneed contract, pay with a credit card online and even set up recurring payments, never having to worry about physically exchanging papers and cards with others.

By enabling consumers to make arrangements through your website and process contracts entirely online – all while still being available by phone – you maintain a high level of customer service and attention for the families you serve as they practice social distancing.

SECURE, ONLINE PLATFORM FOR TRUST DATA AND FILES

Even as the country begins to re-open in some areas, it might be inconvenient or difficult for you or your staff to organize and keep track of trust records, payments and more, especially as transactions are processed online or mailed to your firm.

Both during and after the pandemic, firms should consider moving their recordkeeping to an online workflow, where, with just a few clicks and in one easy-to-manage location, they will have complete, 24/7 access to trust details.

This type of technology can help significantly if a family needs access to records or details after business hours, such as if a loved one dies in the middle of the night and the family needs to know how much money remains on the preneed contract. It can also give you peace of mind knowing that no matter what detail you need from your trust or sales program, including your trust's total market

value or an amount down to a single line on a pre-need contact, you have the information at the tip of your fingers at any time and from any place.

INCORPORATING TECHNOLOGY INTO OPERATIONS

Many professionals may be hesitant to change their processes because of some of the common misconceptions about technology. While change can be intimidating, deathcare firms that transition to and utilize industry-specific technologies, especially as

the world distances itself from one another, can provide better service for families and create an even more sustainable business model for years to come.

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Bill Williams Jr. is president and CEO of Funeral Services Inc., which specializes in the administration and recordkeeping of funeral and cemetery trusts and preneed programs.

10 Freedoms of Using Ceremony During the Pandemic

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

FORT COLLINS, COLORADO – If someone you love has died during the coronavirus pandemic, you have come to grief in an exceptionally challenging moment in history. You may have been separated from your loved one as he or she was dying. You may have been unable to view or spend time with the body after the death. You may have been prevented from having the full funeral you wanted because of gathering and travel restrictions. And people who care about you may not have been able to be near you to support you in your grief. These and other pandemic-related barriers to the cultural grief rituals on which we rely may be making your grief journey especially painful.

I am sorry you have been so deeply affected by this hardship.

As a grief counselor and educator, I know that ceremony helps mourners through the early days and weeks of their grief and can also support their healing in the months and years to come. Funerals are for the living. When funerals are personalized and rich in elements that are meaningful to friends and family, they help mourners set off on a healthy mourning path.

But if you couldn't have an immediate funeral or if

the ceremony you were able to have felt incomplete or unsatisfactory, I want you to know that you can still use ceremony to help you and others who are mourning this death. I hope these 10 freedoms provide you with affirmation and ideas.

1. You have the freedom to embrace ceremony.

The funeral does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. It is a way for you and others who loved the person to say, "We mourn this death, and we need each other during this painful time." If others tell you funerals are unnecessary or old-fashioned, don't listen. They simply haven't been educated on all the reasons humans have relied on funerals since the beginning of time.

2. You have the freedom to hold an immediate private ceremony.

If you were not able to have a bedside ceremony, funeral, committal or any form of service shortly after the death, you can choose to have a private ceremony right now. Ask a spiritual leader, officiant, family member or friend to help you plan a simple online meeting using Zoom, Teams or another tool. You can also hold a small candle-lighting ceremony at your dining room table.

3. You have the freedom to plan one or even more ceremonies to be held at a later time.